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SUBJECT: Egypt: Prime Minister Announces Center of Excellence

11. (SBU) Key Points:

--Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif told the Ambassador and Science Envoy Ahmed Zewail that the Egyptian government (GoE) plans to create a center of excellence targeting entrepreneurship and innovation, although he did not provide a detailed timeline for implementation.

--The Supreme Council on Science and Technology will serve as the lead government agency in creating a blueprint for the center.

--According to Nazif, the GoE envisions the center as a joint US-Egypt project and is seeking a "substantial commitment" of financial and technical assistance outside current USAID programming in Egypt.

12. (U) In a January 26 meeting, the Ambassador and Dr. Zewail met with PM Nazif and four ministers (International Cooperation, Finance, Higher Education, and Local Development) from the Supreme Council on Science and Technology (SCST). This was Zewail's second meeting with Nazif and the SCST, and followed his public statements to support Egypt in identifying key national science and technology priorities.

EGYPT'S PROPOSED CENTER OF EXCELLENCE

13. (SBU) After thanking Zewail for his continued focus on assisting Egypt in building its science and education infrastructure, Nazif launched into a discussion concerning a recently announced GoE plan to build a center of excellence targeting entrepreneurship and innovation initiatives. He said the Supreme Council for Science and Technology had created a taskforce to develop a "blueprint" for the new center. The Ministry of International Cooperation would serve as the lead agency in these efforts. (Note: According to January 14 press accounts, this Cairo-based center will open in January 2011 and will collaborate with private companies, universities, and government technology organizations. End Note.)

14. (SBU) Nazif stated that he envisioned this center as a joint US-Egypt project. The GoE would provide the land and construction of the center's buildings, he said, and the USG would "allocate funds to run the center." He acknowledged that the center's priorities are not fully sketched out, but would likely include a mandate to support projects concerning agriculture (defined as food safety), health, water security, energy, and information technology. More importantly, the center would serve as a focal point to provide financial and technical assistance to "young entrepreneurs starting their own businesses."

15. (SBU) Nazif repeatedly referenced the US-Israel BIRD project as a model for Egypt's proposed center. He said that BIRD succeeded in

building up Israel's science and technology base - providing important loans and research opportunities for both countries - and suggested that the center could play a similar role in supporting Egypt's efforts to do the same.

How to Finance the Center

¶6. (SBU) In response to a question from Zewail about how the center will cover science issues, Nazif said he hoped American and Egyptian universities would participate but stressed his desire that joint projects would focus on value-related research - specifically leading to job creation in important national areas such as agriculture and renewable energy plans. He then pivoted to financing of the center, stating Egypt was seeking a substantial commitment to ensure the center could carry out its mission. "\$10 million is not enough," Nazif stated. For the center to succeed in the manner of programs suggested by President Obama in his Cairo speech in June 2009, Nazif explained the US needs to "think on a grand scale." He did not offer a monetary figure but said that for every dollar offered by the US, Egypt would match that donation with one Egyptian pound. Speaking for the SCST, he said that the center would enable Egypt to develop its technology infrastructure as the US had done in the 1960s

"Go Beyond AID"

¶7. (SBU) The Ambassador noted that the Embassy and AID are working to direct existing resources to Egyptian priorities but the PM immediately interrupted by stating that the government must "go beyond AID programming" and build something that currently does not exist in country. The new center is crucial because the "scientific community needs something to build around and aspire to," Nazif explained. It would ultimately serve as a focal point for Egypt's science and technology community. Noting that Egypt remains committed to supporting President Obama's Cairo initiative, he said that "now is the time for action and the ball is in your court."

¶8. (SBU) Comment: During his initial envoy visit, Zewail spoke repeatedly about his desire to build stronger collaborative relationships in education, science and technology and move away from building vaguely-defined and poorly staffed research organizations. The GoE, however, is clearly seeking to capitalize on a renewed US emphasis on science and technology issues by requesting funding for a new center of excellence. It is doubtful that a new physical center would advance any of the collaborative projects - in health, science, education - the US is already partnering with Egypt.
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